

CULTURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY – LANDSCAPES * OLMSTED PROJECT ADDENDUM

Please submit completed form to: Architectural Survey Coordinator
State Historic Preservation Office, Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development
450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 5, Hartford, CT 06103

PROPERTY NAME (Current/Historic) Taft School		
COUNTY Litchfield	TOWN/CITY Watertown	VILLAGE
JOB NUMBER Primary: 03554 Related Job Numbers:		
Landscape Type <input type="checkbox"/> Park, Parkway, Recreation Area. Scenic Reservation <input type="checkbox"/> City/Regional Plan, Improvement Project <input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision, Suburban Community <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> College/School Campus <input type="checkbox"/> Grounds of Residential Institution <input type="checkbox"/> Grounds of Public Building <input type="checkbox"/> Private Estate / Homestead <input type="checkbox"/> Cemetery / Burial Lot / Memorial / Monument <input type="checkbox"/> Grounds of Commercial / Industrial Building <input type="checkbox"/> Country Club / Resort, Hotel, Club <input type="checkbox"/> Grounds of Church <input type="checkbox"/> Arboretum, Garden <input type="checkbox"/> Exhibition, Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Miscellaneous		
DATE OF ORIGINAL PROJECT: 1909 SUBSEQUENT PROJECTS: 1941		

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DESIGNER(S) (primary)

- ☐ Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.
- ☐ John Charles Olmsted
- ☒ Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.
- ☒ Other firm member(s): Edward Clark Whiting
- ☐ Other notes:

Other Designers (prior to or following Olmsted project: Sasaki, upgrade Camp Field and other athletic facil.

Repositories consulted with source materials

- ☒ Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Olmsted Archives (online albums)
- ☒ Library of Congress
- ☒ Olmsted Online (OlmstedOnline.org)
- ☐ National Archives and Record Administration
- ☐ Connecticut State Library
- ☐ Hartford History Center
- ☒ Other: The Taft School (website)

Observations regarding features characteristic of Olmsted firm design

Surviving features resulting from the work of the Olmsted firm's design work include: Entry drive modified, but largely the same; Spaces around the core campus; Location of athletic Fields closest to main campus (currently being upgraded by Sasaki

Despite the fact that much of the built work of the Olmsted Brothers—entry drive experience, spaces around the core campus, and upgrade of the athletic fields—the campus in its open rural character and views and vistas shaped by specimen trees and other plantings, feels very much like an Olmsted landscape of this period.

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I D E N T I F I C A T I O N	PROPERTY NAME (Current/Historic) Taft School (Job #03554)		
	COUNTY Litchfield	TOWN/CITY Watertown	VILLAGE
	STREET AND NUMBER (and/or location) 110 Woodbury Road		
	OWNER(S) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE <input type="checkbox"/> MUNICIPAL <input type="checkbox"/> STATE <input type="checkbox"/> FEDERAL <input type="checkbox"/> TRIBAL <input type="checkbox"/> EASEMENT		
	LAT/LONG COORDINATES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Center Point <input type="checkbox"/> Polygon 41.604056, -73.123957		
	PARCEL INFORMATION Acres: 163.8 PID(s): MBLU(s): 99 58		
	USE (Present) Private coed college preparatory school		(Historic) Private Boys college preparatory school
	SURVEY TYPE <input type="checkbox"/> Reconnaissance-Level <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Intensive-Level		
D E S C R I P T I O N	LANDSCAPE TYPE (Check all that apply) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Designed <input type="checkbox"/> Vernacular <input type="checkbox"/> Cultural/Ethnographic <input type="checkbox"/> Agricultural <input type="checkbox"/> Linear <input type="checkbox"/> System/Multi-Site <input type="checkbox"/> Residential <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Institutional <input type="checkbox"/> Maritime <input type="checkbox"/> Green <input type="checkbox"/> Park- Active Recreation <input type="checkbox"/> Park-Passive Recreation or Commemorative <input type="checkbox"/> Other – specify:		
	DATE OR PERIOD (Include source of date) 1909-1941 (Olmsted Research Guide Online)		
	DESIGNERS (Entities that created, designed, constructed, or shaped the landscape) Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects		
	DESIGN SCOPE (For designed landscapes, explain what work was commissioned) Layout and planting for school campus, first at Nova Scotia hill (not built) then in present location		
	LOCATION OF DRAWINGS/IMAGES/SOURCE MATERIAL Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Library of Congress – Olmsted Associates Resources		
	VISUAL ASSESSMENT SUMMARY (Check boxes for the qualities that are key features of this landscape. If attaching descriptive narrative, consider these categories.) <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 48%;"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Layout & Spatial Relationships <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Circulation <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Topography <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Plantings/Vegetation <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Views & Vistas <input type="checkbox"/> Boundaries </div> <div style="width: 48%;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Water Features <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Drainage <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Buildings/Structures/Objects <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Recreational Space <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="checkbox"/> Design Style: </div> </div>		

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C O N D I T I O N	EXISTING CONDITION <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Recognizable <input type="checkbox"/> Not Extant/Not Recognizable Changes: Additional buildings in the core campus, revised entry drive and parking		
	POTENTIAL THREATS <input type="checkbox"/> None Known <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Infrastructure Improvements <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Onsite Development <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Adjacent Development <input type="checkbox"/> Vandalism <input type="checkbox"/> Overuse <input type="checkbox"/> Deferred Maintenance <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Invasive Vegetation <input type="checkbox"/> Environmental – specify: <input type="checkbox"/> Other – specify:		
E N V I R O N M E N T	SETTING (One sentence description) Open rural site characterized by large areas of open fields with a tight core campus built around a lake		
	VEGETATION <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Maintained Open Land <input type="checkbox"/> Natural Open Land <input type="checkbox"/> Woodland/Forest <input type="checkbox"/> Wetland <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Specimen Plants <input type="checkbox"/> Other – specify:		
	SLOPE <input type="checkbox"/> Level/Nearly Level <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Moderate Slope <input type="checkbox"/> Steep Slope Elevation (ASML): 622'		
	CONNECTICUT PHYSIOGRAPHIC PROVINCE (Eco-Region) <input type="checkbox"/> Northwest Highlands <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Western Uplands <input type="checkbox"/> Western Coastal Slope <input type="checkbox"/> Central Valley <input type="checkbox"/> Eastern Coastal Slope <input type="checkbox"/> Eastern Uplands Soil Description: Site dominated by well-drained Udorthents and Paxton and Montauk soils.		
H I S T O R Y	SUMMARY (Provide a brief overview in this space. More detailed narrative can be attached.) A school founded by Horace Taft and his wife Winifred with Olmsted Brothers as primary consultants. See <i>Continuation Sheet</i>		
	NATIONAL REGISTER RECOMMENDATION Entered by: Lucy Lawliss <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Recommended Eligible (Criterion <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A <input type="checkbox"/> B <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> C <input type="checkbox"/> D) <input type="checkbox"/> Not Eligible <input type="checkbox"/> Not Evaluated Explanation: NR Listed: <input type="checkbox"/> District-Contributing <input type="checkbox"/> District-Non-Contributing <input type="checkbox"/> Individual <input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient Documentation		
R E P O R T E D B Y	NAME Lucy Lawliss	ORGANIZATION Red Bridge Group	DATE December 2021
	ADDRESS 2100 Green Street, San Francisco, California 94123		
	PHOTOGRAPHER Lucy Lawliss	DATE November 10, 2021	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Permission to use photographs (public domain)
	SURVEY METHOD <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Site Visit/In-Person Walkover <input type="checkbox"/> Drive-through/Windshield <input type="checkbox"/> Digital Review Only		

ATTACHMENTS (Include the following items in the PDF)

- ☒ Location Map ☒ Site Map ☒ Photographs with captions ☒ Historic Images (if applicable)
☒ Narrative Description of Property ☒ Historical Narrative of Property ☒ References

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION OF PROPERTY (Visual Assessment Summary)

Layout & Spatial Relationships: The core campus of buildings around the lake appears to be a layout accomplished by Olmsted Brothers with the original sports fields off to the east at the bottom of a long gentle slope.

Circulation: Primary vehicular circulation enters from Woodbury Road and loops around the front of the main campus buildings. This is a modification of the Olmsted Brothers plan. Pedestrian circulation is on a number of paved walks around the main campus.

Topography: The long slope that comes down towards the school from the west is a character defining feature and the flat land at its base has historically been soggy although there have been many attempts to drain it. The school is undertaking another, more involved project to drain the field.

Plantings/Vegetation: Olmsted Brothers, primarily Edward Clark Whiting, have done planting plans that have included foundation plants around the buildings along with specimen trees around the core campus.

Views & Vistas The campus sits on in an open rural setting with views out across play fields. From the core campus buildings, the lake is a primary close view as well as something to look across to more distant landscape features, such as the heating plant tower.

Drainage: Drainage has always been an issue for the school and Olmsted Brothers created a drainage swale that follows the southern boundary paralleling Woodbury Road. Sheet water flow has been unsuccessfully handled at the base of the slope on the prime athletic fields and another project is underway to correct the issue.

Buildings/Structures/Objects: The core campus is made up of a number of historic buildings that would include the heating plant and tower across the campus off North Avenue.

Recreational Space: Taft School has had a strong athletic program from the beginning and has grown to include a number of sports and associated facilities.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Horace Dutton Taft (1861-1943) was the younger brother of William Howard Taft, 27th president of the United States and Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. The brothers were both born in Ohio, and both graduated from Yale, Horace Taft in 1883, after which he earned a law degree at Cincinnati Law School. But Horace's interests were in education, and he returned to New Haven in part because of a high school teacher he met there named Winifred Thompson. In 1890, Horace opened a school for boys in Pelham Manor, New York with underwriting from a family friend.

In 1891, Taft married Winifred Thompson.¹ The couple was interested in having their own school and began looking for a location in Connecticut. In 1893, they were offered The Warren House, a hotel in Watertown, where they began with a curriculum that included Latin, mathematics, English, history, and science, Greek, French and German. In 1898, the school was officially named Taft School, a boy's college preparatory program with most graduates matriculating to Yale. Winifred's support included managing the school's finances and planning activities for the students.²

During this period, the Tafts also worked on plans for a new school building on Nova Scotia hill, located about two miles from The Warren House location. In 1908, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., who was also beginning a

¹ "Hillhouse High School," *The Morning Journal-Courier*, New Haven, Connecticut, December 23, 1891.

² Taft School: *Our History*, <https://www.taftschoool.org/about/our-history>, accessed January 3, 2022.

CONTINUATION SHEET Taft School (#03554) / 110 Woodbury Road, Watertown

planning project for the City of New Haven, made a visit to the site and spent the day “getting acquainted with the ground” and recommending the New York architectural firm of Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson for the new building. The visit began a relationship between the Olmsted firm and Taft School that would continue for more than two decades. It is interesting to note that President Howard Taft took office in 1909 and almost immediately created the Fine Arts Commission to oversee the implementation of the McMillan Plan for Washington, D. C., which had largely stalled after its completion in 1902: Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. was both a member of the McMillan Planning Commission and appointed by President Taft to serve a first term on the Fine Arts Commission.

Olmsted’s planning for the Nova Scotia hill site was extensive. In October of 1908, he sent Taft “our preliminary plan for your new school grounds” showing the new highway location, the playfield, the building site, and some of the important plantings....”³ Mrs. Taft’s death in 1909 at the age of 49 was a blow to Horace who abandoned those plans and instead expanded the existing campus.

Taft had been the school’s sole owner, but in 1912 he incorporated the school with \$300,000 of capital stock. Retaining a majority of stock for himself, the remainder went to Harley F. Roberts, head of the Latin Department. Minerva C. Bovaird, school secretary and assistant to Taft, was also listed as an incorporator.⁴

In 1913, the Horace Dutton Taft Hall was built, based on Bertram Goodhue’s architectural designs. *The Hartford Courant* reported that the expansion “will give the school a capacity of 230.”⁵ The *Norwich Bulletin* reported on progress in December of 1912: “The cement mixer was kept in operation all day Sunday for the purpose of avoiding any hindrance with the work.”⁶

Olmsted remained engaged in the redirected planning, visiting in February of 1913 to make planting plans for the campus, a process that continued into 1914. In February of 1914, Olmsted gave Taft an estimate of \$3,627 for his planting plan. Taft wanted “the planting done around the buildings as far as possible this spring” and requested a cost estimate. Olmsted responded that his “off hand” estimate was \$200 or \$300. In June, Olmsted sent an updated plan for further planting in the fall and following spring. A focal point was the “hardiness of rhododendrons in Watertown.”

Olmsted continued sporadic involvement over the next few years including sending plants and recommending fertilizers. In 1919, Taft wrote to Olmsted: “...we want to have all three, the track, the tennis courts, and the pond perfectly made, humanly speaking, but I should like to have the job finished before the snow flies if that is possible.”

In July of 1919, Olmsted provided a set of blueprints for an athletic field, followed by bids from three contractors ranging from \$25,000 to almost \$30,000. School officials objected to the “high” estimates, and Olmsted facilitated negotiations for lower bid prices.

By 1925, Taft was in the process of selecting an architect for new school buildings. Writing to Olmsted, he noted “Whether I can ever go on and finish the building I do not know, but I trust that it will be finished after I am gone. My hope is to have the plan made and to have you lay out the grounds so that anything we do may be done in accordance with the plan.” (Taft retired more than a decade later, in 1936.)

In 1926, planning was underway with the selection of James Gamble Rogers as the architect. In September of 1926, Olmsted and Rogers toured the grounds. Olmsted noted several trees to be saved during construction along with details about the tennis courts, hockey rink and golf course. Work continued for several years with Olmsted addressing issues ranging from sewage lines to the advisability of planting vines

³ Project Correspondence, Library of Congress.

⁴ “New Incorporations,” *Hartford Courant*, April 11, 1912.

⁵ “Taft School Bond Issue Floated,” *Hartford Courant*, February 24, 1912.

⁶ “Watertown,” *Norwich Bulletin*, December 5, 1912.

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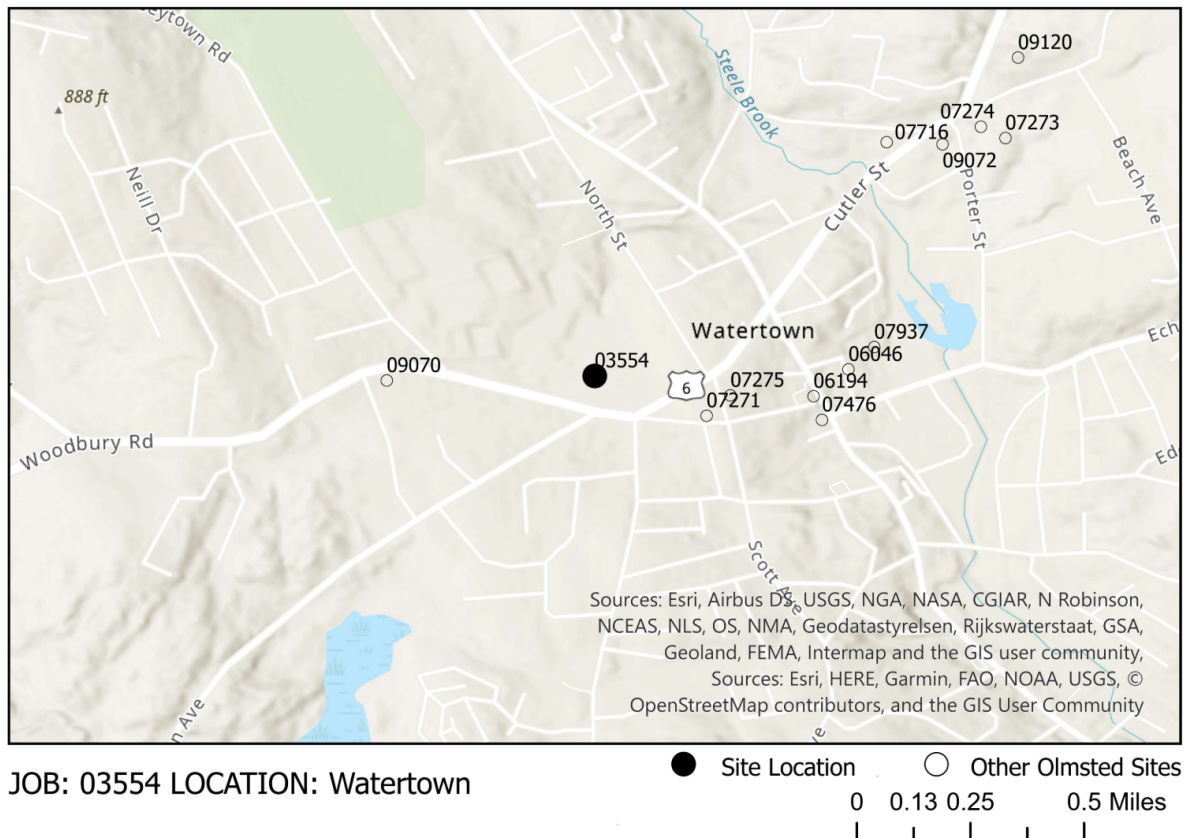
in the fall. By 1930, the Warren House was demolished, and several new buildings were constructed to accommodate enrollment of more than 300 students.

As work progressed, E.C. Whiting also became involved and became the primary contact. In a visit to the site in November of 1928, he noted a problem that would become a constant challenge for planners everywhere in the years to come: "They are in sore need of a place for parking cars, especially for evening functions or other gatherings...."⁷

REFERENCES

The Taft School website. Available at www.taftschool.org.

GRAPHICS



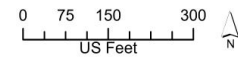
⁷ Project Correspondence, Library of Congress.

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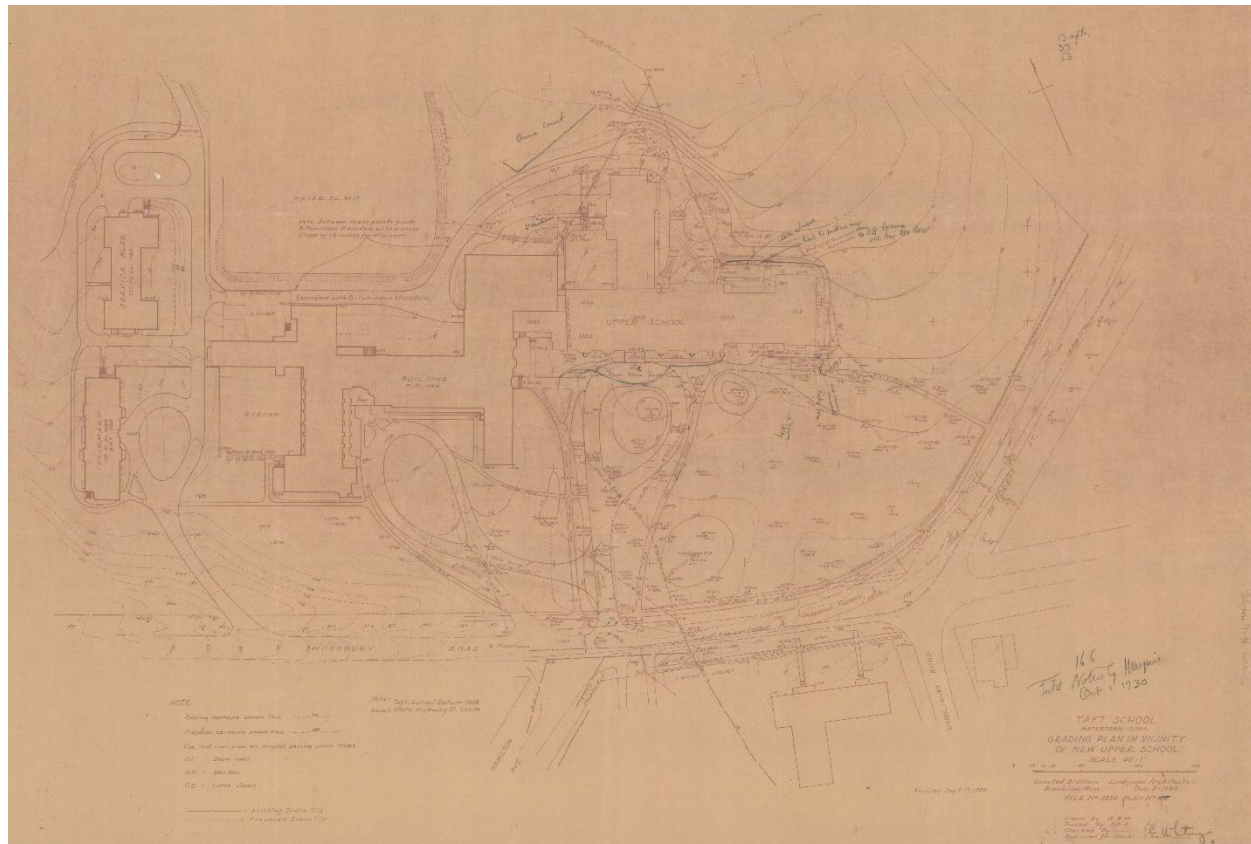
CONTINUATION SHEET Taft School (#03554) / 110 Woodbury Road, Watertown



JOB: 03554 LOCATION: Watertown PROJECT: Taft School



CONTINUATION SHEET Taft School (#03554) / 110 Woodbury Road, Watertown



Taft School, Grading Plan in Vicinity of New Upper School, 1929, Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects.
(Source: courtesy Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site)



JOB: 03554 LOCATION: Watertown PROJECT: Taft School

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Contemporary aerial photograph overlaid with Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects plan for Taft School campus. (Source: Kevan Klosterwill)



View looking north through entry gate to The Taft School campus. (All photographs taken by the author in 2021 unless otherwise noted)



View looking east at The Taft School across the front drive and parking – area reworked (date TBD) from Olmsted Brothers plan.



View looking north across campus lake at the rear of main school complex.



View looking west along boundary drainage channel along Woodbury Road.



View looking east down slope towards original sports field that historically has had a problem draining water that comes off this hill.